



GRACE CHURCH

Temples and Idols

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Grace Church | 1.26.19

Good morning, church. My wife and I are grateful to be back worshipping with you after being gone last week for a quick getaway in celebration of our anniversary. Thanks for caring for us well, but as always I want to remind you that there is no better place to be this morning than with the people of God in the presence of God hearing from the Word of God and participating in the worship of God.

The summer after my first year in college, I had the opportunity to join a small team of missionaries in Nepal. The organization I was with helped equip and send high schoolers overseas on short term trips. We were in Nepal for several weeks doing evangelism in several remote mountain villages and helping to support ministry in a local church in Kathmandu, the capital. While we were in Kathmandu, one of the first days we arrived, we had the opportunity to get out and see the city. One experience we had will never leave my memories. We visited the house of the Kumari, which is a temple dedicated to Nepal's living goddess. In the temple lives a young girl, chosen as only a child through a terrifying ritual full of animal sacrifice, to act as the living inhabitation of the goddess Durga, a deity who is said to dwell and manifest herself in the body of a young girl. This girl is locked away from the rest of society. For years, from the time she is four or five until she has her first period and the goddess is said to have left her, the Kumari can only speak to her immediate family who visit on occasion. She is carried on a throne whenever she goes outside of the temple, which is not often and only for select religious festivals, because her feet must never touch the bare ground and defile her. In 2017, the Kumari of Kathmandu that I saw was replaced by a younger one, only 3 years old at the time. But as I walked up with my team to the temple, we were told that at certain times of day the Kumari would come out to be worshipped. We watched as several men and women gathered in a small courtyard and bowed low as the Kumari came out on a balcony for just a few moments. I don't normally use a lot of photos, but I want you to look and imagine yourself there. Here is the temple and the balcony where the Kumari emerged:





And this is what the Kumari looked like at the time I was there, still just a young girl, always dressed similarly and in ornate makeup.



Now, you might find this to be an interesting cultural tradition with no particular significance. Something to find interesting, but not much more. But I wish I could help you feel what I felt that day. The darkness of it all was palpable. There we were, a small group of Christ's ambassadors, surrounded by a living idol, a young girl with no choice but to be prayed to for healing and prosperity. It broke my heart, and you cannot stand in that courtyard, as a follower of Christ, and not feel the spiritual dissonance. We felt so out of place, out of fellowship, the temple of God witnessing the temple of man.

And realistically, this is not a feeling we feel often as Christians, particularly in Waco. We are cultural acceptable: if not the majority, at least the protected minority. Christianity and Judeo-Christian values are inescapably ingrained into our culture, and even if they are digressing, the time is few and far between when we feel entirely uncomfortable, out of place, or spiritually distinct. And what this comfortability does to us is it causes us to forget our true identity. Like the people of Kathmandu, and as we will see, the people of Corinth, we become so familiar with our



idols that we rely on them and depend on them for our very livelihood and identity. We “yoke” ourselves to the darkness of idolatry and unbelief, looking for the benefits of life and glory that only come in partnership with Christ, not the world.

The result of our embracing the paradox of weakness and the new covenant ministry of reconciliation is a burning desire for holiness. Instead of giving ourselves over to idols, we cleanse ourselves as temple of the living God. In our text this morning, we see Paul giving both a command to holiness and a reason for holiness.

The Command: Do Not Be Unequally Yoked

Take a look at **verse 14**. At first, it may seem like Paul is making a sudden turn. He has been speaking to the Corinthians about their relationship with himself and his fellow apostles. Since the early parts of his letter, he has been building a robust defense of his ministry, and in what does he say in verse 11? “Our heart is wide open.” In other words, I’ve said what I need to say, I’m not holding anything back. My defense is coming to a close: just as I have widened my heart to you, I hope you will widen it to me as well.

Then he launches directly into a command in **verse 14**. But this admonition to the Corinthians is actually the climax of his defense to this point. He is saying essentially, all I have been reasoning with you about, defending myself and my ministry, and the truth of the gospel and the paradox of weakness, all comes down to this point: don’t be unequally yoked with unbelievers. This command is the natural result of all we have studied in 2 Corinthians to this point. Paul has been wanting to say this all along, he has been building up to this. He was smart: he could’ve opened his letter like this, but he knew he needed credibility first. And so now he gets to the bottom of why he is writing. The Corinthians are yoking themselves to unbelievers, and for the sake of their eternal future, they need to stop.

What does it mean to be “unequally yoked” with unbelievers? A yoke is a device that a farmer would use to link two animals together for better pulling power. The metaphor Paul is using here of a yoke refers to an Old Testament law where God wisely commands the Israelites not to yoke two animals of two different kinds together. But Surprisingly enough if you have been in Christian culture for a while you have most likely heard this passage before as some sort of admonition for your dating life. The idea is: “don’t date or marry someone who is not a believer”. If you do, you will be “unequally yoked”. Well, I’m here this morning to tell you that this is not what Paul is trying to tell the Corinthians. It’s not wrong: Christian wisdom would tell us that you should not marry and make covenant with an unbeliever, precisely because of the reasoning we will get to in a moment. So, not marrying an unbeliever might a small and specific application of this text’s general truth, but is not even close to the main application here. The main point is much broader, and it has to do with the Corinthian culture.



In Corinth, much like in Kathmandu where I saw the temple of the living goddess, the culture of the city was driven by religious cults. There were several powerful religious cults in the city of Corinth, and the entire city was driven by their influence. In the social life of the city, the religious cults were the ones that held lavish banquets and feasts for the self-made upper class. In the arts and fine culture department, it was the religious cults that owned the theaters, and the best art pieces were statues of the gods and lavish, ornate temples full of artistic value. In commerce, the religious cults attracted large crowds for semi-regular festivals who spent money in shops all across the city. Politically, it was the cult priests who primarily served as civic leaders and who aggregated their political power with their religious clout. Even the sports and games for which Corinth was so famous were influenced heavily by the religious cults; the winning athletes received honorary religious titles and their statues went up in the temple. As one commentator puts it: "People looked to the cults not for a sacred perspective in a secular world, nor even for a retreat from the present world, but for the nucleus of their world."¹

All of this to say that if you lived in Corinth at the time you received this letter from Paul, and you wanted to succeed in life and achieve status and notoriety and wealth and prosperity and all the happiness of the world, there is only one route you could foreseeably take: hitch yourself to the religious cults. And no doubt this is the very problem that the Corinthian Church found themselves in. They had been taught by society that outward appearance is what matters and that weakness is a four letter word, and the way away from weakness and towards personal strength is through association with and approval of idol worship. We know too that the religious cults of the time were rampant not just with personal pride, but with all kinds of sexual immorality. This is a huge issue that Paul addresses in his first letter to the Corinthians, and likely something that the Corinthians still struggle with.

So what is one of the primary purposes of Paul writing to the Corinthian church? It's not so that he can remind them not to date or marry unbelievers. That is definitely something that is implied, but not his primary point. In fact, he encourages the church in 1 Corinthians 7 to *remain* with an unbelieving spouse if converted after marriage. Paul is not commanding the Corinthians not to associate with nonbelievers in some broad way, as if he is calling them to monasticism. He is not discouraging them from evangelism or love or hospitality to those outside of the faith. In telling them not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers, he means "get out of the religious cults. Separate from them, don't be yoked together with them." And for him to say that to the Corinthians is very serious. The religious, idolatrous cults were the nucleus of their culture, and no doubt many Corinthian Christians attempted to maintain their status in these cults while also trying to follow Jesus. But the text is making it extremely clear: that doesn't work.

And remember, the very fact that Paul was so entirely *different* and *other* in the way he presented himself was precisely the reason that the Corinthians began to listen to false teaching and mistrust him in the first place. Paul wants them to know that his ministry, and the life of every true

¹ Timothy Savage, *Power Through Weakness*



Christian, is so paradoxically *other* from the self-made status boasted in by the religious cults of the day.

So this brings us to the question that we have to face. The same question that the Corinthians had to answer. What cults of idolatry are you yoked to? While I am unlikely to find any of our church members enrolled as a participating member in the local cult of Poseidon or Aphrodite, we are not immune to this command. Let's think through the lens of the spheres of culture that the religious cults of Corinth controlled.

Social. The religious cults that the Corinthians were partnering with controlled the social life of the city. If you separate yourself from them. You would be a social outcast. Although you may not be seen as a social "outcast" as a Christian, it certainly doesn't help your popularity level to speak real truth and to boast in your weakness. If the consuming goal of your decision-making is that you would be well known and well loved, you have unequally yoked yourself to the cult of social status. This hits home when we think of how prone we are to desire to please men, how hurt we are when we know we haven't been invited to the get together that everyone else has, how hard we try to fit in and adapt to trends. This is part and parcel the very reason so many of use social media. We become so obsessed with what one author calls a "pack" mentality that we begin to make enemies out of friends and lead ourselves down the path of division and disunity. We are so eager to belong to the pack that we place any one who seems to disagree or differ in small social boxes and make war with posts and pictures. Russell Moore says it like this: "Church splits and Twitter wars aren't really all that different. Joining a cult and spending time wondering what people think about you online are different in degree, but maybe not that much in kind."² Slowly but surely, we are yoking ourselves to a social cult, just like the Corinthians.

Cultural. The religious cults also controlled the art and culture of the day. Here is one area where Christians are so prone to lose our distinctiveness: the media that we consume. It's 2020, and we must be more careful than ever that our choices of entertainment and media are pointed towards a Christ-exalting purpose. I'm a millennial, technology and media are my wheelhouse. They shaped me, grew up with me. The first iPhone was released when I was still in school, and the floodgates opened. It is easier than ever to reach into our pocket and seeked to be awed. It's what author Tony Reinke calls searching for "spectacles".³ We want a show. And these spectacles, be it articles or videos or music or podcasts, all are telling us something, competing for our attention. All of this is doing something, shaping us, yoking us. Reinke says:

We are creatures shaped by what grabs our attention—and what we give our attention to becomes our objective and subjective reality. . . . We attend to what interests us. We become like what we watch.

² thegospelcoalition.org/article/can-soul-survive-social-media/

³ Tony Reinke, *Competing Spectacles: Treasuring Christ in a Media Age*



And this is not just the inherently *sinful* media that we consume that shapes us: pornography, or shows with sexual immorality for instance. The morally neutral media we consume shapes us too, invites us into the gluttonous cult of culture, where we consume so much emptiness and distraction that we lose our appetite for weightier pleasures and joys. Slowly but surely, we are yoking ourselves to the cult of culture.

Commercial. Another way we can unequally yoke ourselves is to buy into the cult of consumerism. Just the other day I looked back at my Amazon account orders, perusing how many times I purchased things I didn't need, simply because it was easy too. Just a few clicks. For me, my weakness is mostly books. Consumerism tells us that our true desires and true joys are just a few clicks away, just a little saving and a little spending and the desires of our heart can be met. I won't say much here, but only this: success and wealth may truly be used for the glory of God, but if you are more concerned with your bottom line and your increasing profits and consumption than you are with pleasing God, then you are unequally yoked. Jesus tells us for a reason that we cannot serve both God and money. Fastening our fate to our bank account is the most surefire way to ensure that we miss the kingdom of God.

Political. By yoking themselves with unbelievers and the religious cults of their day, the Corinthians got close to political power. I fear so often that we long for the same. We so closely link our identity to our views and opinions that we forget our loyalty is to the true king of the universe. In a time of two parties, we are one or the other. Here is a question to help you gauge if this is where your idolatry lies:

"Do you feel that you have more in common with people who share your faith but not your politics, or your politics but not your faith? What does your answer reveal about where your truest loyalties reside?"⁴

The reality is, we live in a world which is always preaching in opposition to the kind of new covenant ministry we see in 2 Corinthians. Just like the unbelieving culture of Corinth, those who neither know or follow Christ promise success and happiness and recognition and all the outward appearances of power and strength, if we would only partner ourselves to them. But the command is clear, the same for the Corinthians and for us: do not be unequally yoked.

The Reason: What Hath The Temple to Do With Idols?

But why? What is it about this kind of partnership that is so serious and potentially harmful? Our text helps us answer that question. Look in **14b-15**. Here Paul is making a simple argument of difference. The partnership between the Corinthian Christians and the pagan cults of Corinth was an *unequal* one. There is some sort of imbalance in this relationship that comes from the core.

⁴ Scotty Smith, Twitter.



Notice first the words Paul uses to define this relationship. Besides the image of a yoke, he also uses *fellowship*, *accord*, *portion*, and *agreement*. He uses several different words and images here to show one singular meaning: there is a mismatch. Again, these are very intimate and personal words. He is not urging the Corinthians to separate themselves from the unbelieving world, to close off friendship or partnerships of all kinds. What he is saying is that in those relationships and partnerships, there should be an inherent dissonance. There won't be full fellowship, there won't be full mutual agreement, there won't be a shared portion, there won't be harmony. If you have been a Christian for any amount of time, I suspect you feel this. It's perhaps felt most strongly when you think back on your life *before* you were a Christian. Oftentimes you may continue on in relationship with friends from your past, or you may find yourself in similar environments at work with the same unbelieving coworkers. For some, they come to faith in Christ but their spouse does not. And all of a sudden, as your life is transformed, there is a distance between you and those who you used to feel so close to. Your interests change, your priorities change, your desires change. And this might be a saddening thing at times, as you sense old friends slipping away. Maybe friends have rejected you or turned their back on you, mainly due to your refusal to accept as right and holy what they do. It makes you feel weak. Different. Unwanted, perhaps.

And here is what Paul is urging the Corinthians to remember: this is your destiny in Christ. You should not feel comfortable in a fallen world, you should feel like an alien, a stranger in a foreign land. Don't yoke yourself to an unbelieving world, because it won't work. There can't be true fellowship, true unity, true harmony. Embrace your role as an ambassador of your new king.

But for all those who feel the ache of being a resident alien in an unbelieving world, our text makes the differences between you and the world very clear. Notice the comparison of words here. **14b**: what partnership has *righteousness* with *lawlessness*? Here we are reminded of the identity of the Christian. Remember our glorious passage from two weeks ago? 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In our union with Christ, all those who repent of sin and trust in Christ by faith have become the very righteousness of God. You may not feel like it, but the difference between you and someone who is not in Christ is like oil and water. Righteousness is the possession of a perfect record. Lawlessness is the possession not just of a stained record, but of no understanding of any standard. Chaos, disorder. If you have been made right in Christ, how can righteousness partner with lawlessness? Of course it won't work.

Notice next the identity of the Christian in verse 14. What fellowship has *light* with *darkness*. Remember back to chapter 4:8. *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.* In the good news of the gospel, our hearts have been illuminated with the knowledge of the glory of God. We are lights. Where we go, we shine the glory of God, we illuminate the dark world as a city on a hill. But for those who have not repented and trusted in Christ? 2 Corinthians 4:6, "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Our world is in the dark. And how can light and dark coexist in the same space?



Paul gets even more serious in **verse 15**. As we share in the righteousness of Christ, we learned that this doesn't just mean that we share in an abstract exchange of goods and services. We share in Christ himself. We are united to him by faith. And this is the reminder he is giving the Corinthians: you are Christ's representatives. You are his ambassadors. You are his bride. You are united to him, so where you go, he is. And the unbelieving world, in unrepentance is blind to all this. They blindly follow the enemy Satan. This word "Belial" is only used once in the New Testament, here in this verse. It literally means, "the worthless", but it is traditionally used as another name for Satan. Note the starkness of contrast. On one end, the infinitely valuable Christ, king of the Ages, and on the other hand Satan, the worthless rebel of heaven, the tempter of the people of God. When you yoke yourself to the world, finding your value and worth and identity and truth there, you are exchanged value for worthlessness. What accord has Christ with Belial?

Friends, I know this is very heavy. This text does not pull punches. We are tempted to believe that we are really no different from the unbelieving world. We've been polished up a bit more maybe, enlightened just a bit. But this kind of thinking will lead us to the place where we cannot go. This kind of thinking will lead us straight away from faithful witness into the heart of idolatry. Yes, we should not view ourselves more highly than we ought. Nowhere in 2 Corinthians does Paul boast of himself as a self-made man. Apart from Christ we are nothing. But don't forget that in Christ, you have a brand new identity. You are the righteousness of God, the light in the darkness, the representative of Christ in the world. And not only that, it goes further. Look at verses **16-18**.

Church, the primary reason why you will always feel and should always feel a healthy strangeness to the unbelieving world is because you are, as this text tells us, the temple of God. Paul is summarizing here a number of different Old Testament passages, and here is his point. In every Christian, God has made his dwelling with you in Christ, walked among you. He is your God, you are his people. You belong to no one else. He is your father, you are sons and daughters and heirs. Intimacy and adoption are yours in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit lives within you, tabernacling with you. And as the temple of God, there is no place for idols.

Imagine walking into a place of Christian worship and seeing row after row of carved figures acknowledging and honoring ancient deities. Have you ever been into a Hindu temple? It's hard to count the number of images and idols lined up. If you walked in church next week, and that is what you saw, you would be shocked. You might say just this: "What agreement has the temple of God, the church of God, the people, of God, with idols?" And this is just so, Church. This is exactly the point. In yoking ourselves to the unbelieving world, we turn towards idols. And this is not a light problem. Colossians 3:5-6 implores us: "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming." Do you see that? Exodus 20 tells us that God is a jealous God, who cannot stand by as his people worship what is false, as they trade the glory of God for the glory of created things. His wrath is coming on behalf of idolatry. What agreement does the temple of God have to do with idols?



A Choice of Two Yokes

Just this week an interview came out with Aaron Rodgers, quarterback of the Green Bay Packers. Rodgers is in the last few years of a long career, most consider him to be one of the most talented QB's of all time. And Rodgers used to be an outspoken Christian, but in a new interview he says he has more or less abandoned his faith. It's no longer for him. Listen to what he says. "Religion can be a crutch... something that people have to have to make themselves feel better... b/c it's set up binary, it's us & them, saved & unsaved, heaven & hell, it's enlightened & heathen, it's holy & righteous...that makes a lot of people feel better a/b themselves."

Basically, what has turned Rodgers from the faith is the fact that he didn't like passages like 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. He considered the Christian religion to be too exclusive: us vs. them. And here is where I stop to tell you, he is right. We are exclusive in our worship. But we must never forget that the exclusivity of the gospel is exactly what makes it good news. The gospel does not say: I am better than you, be like me. The gospel says: God is better than anything, and you can have him. And this is Paul's point in our passage. Don't you see how great God is? He shone the light of the gospel in our dark hearts, he came to us, to dwell with us and adopt us as his own, not so we can create new idols out of our enlightenment, but so that we could trade all our old dead idols for the living God! You see, there are only two options in this world: you can dwell with your idols, or you can dwell with God. And the offer of the Gospel is not us vs. them, it's the temple of God vs. the temple of idolatry, it's the yoke of Christ vs. the yoke of sin.

Look how text circles back around in **7:1**, back to the command to not be unequally yoked. Notice how Paul brings it back up again. He says: *because we have these promises*. It's because we have intimacy and adoption with God that we could not dare to yoke ourselves to the world. You see, friends, you will take some yoke today. And for the rest of your life. You are not powerful enough to not be controlled by something. You will either be completely holy in the end, or live forever with a heart full of enslaving idols. So you have a choice, a choice between two yokes. On one hand, you can yoke yourself the unbelieving world and all the cults of religion calling out to you. Ultimately, this will lead you down the path of idolatry as you substitute God the creator for whatever created thing or idea gives you a sense of peace. And as one author has put it, you will become what you worship. Your idols will become your self made god, and you will become just like them. Your god this god will begin to look like you, think like you, and control you.⁵ You will become like your idol: spiritually inanimate and empty and lifeless, with an appearance of outward strength but inwardly dark and lawless.

But that is not the only way. You can also choose this day another yoke. Maybe you've felt this yoke before, and you need to come back. Maybe you've never felt it and you need to come in repentance for the first time. Either way, this morning, Jesus Christ is calling out to all who are tired of dragging around burdens, who are tired of being pulled into death by idols who promise life. Will you listen to the call of Christ this morning?

⁵ G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*



For all who have yoked themselves to cult of social status, Christ says come to me. In this world, they will hate you as they hated me. But take heart, I have overcome the world. Come to me, and I will give you right status before the Father. Listen to Christ's words in Revelation 3:20-21:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Today, you can unyoke yourself from a desire to sit on the throne of men and instead yoke yourself to Christ, who promises that as he conquers you will conquer with him and sit on the throne of God. Which is the better yoke?

For all those that have yoked themselves to the cult of culture, Christ says come to me. Stop trading empty pleasures, when at my right hand are pleasures for evermore. Stop looking for spectacle in the art of idolatry, instead search for true beauty that points to faith, not sight. When you come to me with eyes of faith, you will see the story of redemption unfold like a canvas with unimaginable majesty. You can yoke yourself to the fleeting distraction of your eyes, or to the undying beauty of faith: which is the better yoke?

For all those that have yoked themselves to the cult of economic prosperity, Christ says come to me. Find rest from your labors for material wealth. In my Father's house are many rooms, I go to prepare a heavenly place for you where all my riches will be your riches to share and where toiling work and covetness are no more. You can yoke yourself to the nine-to-five American dream, chasing wealth and consumerism, or you can yoke yourself to Christ who promises the riches of heaven in himself. Which yoke is better?

And for all those who have yoked themselves to political power or prestige, Christ says come to me. I am king of a new kingdom, a place where justice rolls on like a river and there is perfect harmony and peace and prosperity in my rule. You can yoke yourself to a political vision that promises change but only breeds division, or you can yoke yourself to Christ who promises to build his kingdom now and forever. Which yoke is better?

I hope you can answer that question, Church. The yoke of Christ is the only yoke, which verse 7:1 tells us, will bring you your holiness to completion in the fear of God. Because his yoke is easy and light. He went up to the cross to bleed out and die as a burden-bearing savior, all so you could come to him and lay your oppressive idols at his feet. And if you are worried about being unequally yoked with him, don't be. He came to die as a man to solve that very problem, to become like you so you could become like him. So we end with two imperatives. First a necessary negative: "do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers." Second, a glorious positive: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."



